

Sermon - Proper 22, Year B
What Does Jesus Really Mean About Divorce
10/6/24

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When the Bible presents us with something difficult, that is when we are meant to pay particular attention. It would be nice to preach on the Psalm today, but when something bothers me in the Gospel, this is usually a sign that it might bother other people as well. Today in the Gospel from St. Mark, we find Jesus speaking with the Pharisees about divorce, and his words require some prayerful and deliberate attention. I would hazard to say that most of us have had – or know someone who has had – the sad experience of finding the Bible used as a weapon. The Bible – the vibrant and holy Word of God – is sometimes used as an instrument of shame and rejection, and today’s Gospel is sometimes wrapped up in the midst of it.

But the Word of God is not an instrument of shame or rejection. We are not going to shame or reject anyone today. We’re going to be curious. We’re going to trust in Jesus who *insists*, “come to me, all you who are weary and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Jesus says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

As Jesus speaks with the Pharisees in this tenth chapter of Mark, he is not beginning a conversation *ex nihilo* – out of nothing. Like any contentious issue at any time throughout human history, there is an entire galaxy of social questions, historic teachings, political grappling, and plain old ego struggles all floating around and influencing these matters of discernment in powerful ways. And so we must look at these – not in the interest of smoothing over anything difficult that Jesus might actually be saying, but in order to see more clearly. After all, Jesus says

difficult things all the time – “take up your cross and follow me” – discipleship *is* sometimes difficult, and we don’t shy away from that. But because following Jesus is so important, and because we take what he says so seriously, these difficult sayings are the things to which the Holy Spirit insists that we pay attention.

Imagine that historians two thousand years from now are taking a look at our own time. They are digging back into the recesses of the year 2024, and they somehow find some cache of old documents about a political issue – it helps to think about an issue that’s been around for a long time. Perhaps immigration or perhaps abortion. These difficult questions have been with us as a species for a very long time, but of course, they are understood differently as things like political movements and even technology progress. In order to fully look at immigration or abortion in the year 2024, we need to understand something about the technology of 2024. We need to understand something about the media of 2024. We need to understand the political landscape – who is arguing about what, and how are they doing it? There is quite a lot of context required to get an accurate sense for what is actually happening in a particular moment in a particular place.

And so it helps us when scholars have done extensive work on the social, religious, and political landscape of Jesus’ time. And as it happens, this issue of divorce was quite contentious in the first century in and around Jerusalem, because there was a rift developing in traditional Jewish teaching. The law permitted divorce – instigated by either the husband or the wife – for four reasons: adultery, failure to provide food, failure to provide clothing, and failure to provide love. In order for a divorce to be recognized, there was quite a lot of work that had to be done, as the initiating party had to prove the adultery or the neglect, and this would involve intense investigation from a team of authorities. It was invasive, it was expensive (you had to pay the

investigators), and it was all rather humiliating, no matter what sort of grounds you were using to petition. These details come from the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, as well as from the various supplemental texts of legal interpretation that were being written in and around the first century.

Around Jesus' time, there were two rabbis who were preaching and teaching within two different interpretations of the law. Rabbai Shammai and his followers believed in a strict interpretation of the fourfold divorce law. They were the traditionalists, of sorts. Rabbi Hillel and his followers took a look at the Hebrew texts of Exodus and Deuteronomy and came up with a different interpretation – as they looked closely, they believed that one of the words could be translated to include the phrase, “any cause.” Rabbi Hillel taught that only men could initiate divorce, and that in addition to adultery or neglect, a man could divorce his wife for what the text calls *devar* – or “any cause.” This was the source of great controversy among the Pharisees.

And so when the Pharisees are asking Jesus, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” they are not asking in some abstract way. Not just some nebulous “for any reason.” They are literally asking him, “do you agree with the teachings of Rabbi Shammai or the teachings of Rabbi Hillel?”

And Jesus is saying, “I agree with the teachings of Rabbi Shammai,” the stricter version of the law, but also the one that permits both men and women to initiate this process.

This is our context here. We need this information to be thoughtful, then, about what Jesus is saying. Jesus affirms that both men and women have agency, and that serious decisions about relationships should be serious. We certainly never hope to be looking at cases of adultery or neglect, whether material, spiritual, or psychological. But Jesus knows these things happen –

we are people, we need grace. All of us. And so when a relationship breaks down, this text draws our hearts and minds to one fundamental truth that can bring us peace:

Jesus is primarily concerned with human flourishing. Not in the false, cheap “flourishing” we might want to associate with wealth and beauty, but with genuine wholeness and healing. Jesus heals. Jesus restores. Jesus lifts us up and holds us fast. Jesus knows that there are times when a relationship, even a marriage, is in fact what is preventing us from being whole, and in those cases, he does not stop loving us or leading us toward health. What he is saying is that we shouldn’t enter marriage lightly. It is a serious thing – a serious promise – not something that can just be taken or left on a whim. It means something. Don’t marry for money or for sex or for a joke or because you think you’re getting old. Get married to flourish.

And if that marriage breaks down, as they sometimes do, Jesus is there too – with compassion. There is no judgment. There is no condemnation. There is simply life – a life that God himself knows because he lived it, here with us, in his own incarnate Son.

Jesus is the Great Physician, and just as he heals bodies, he heals hearts.

The Gospel today is a challenging Gospel, but it is a liberating Gospel. It shows us that we are meant for flourishing, and that God cares deeply for the warp and weft in the fabrics of our families and our lives.

When the text of the Bible is difficult, this is our invitation to pay close attention. Remarkably, this is often where we discover that the Holy Spirit is more creative and more compassionate than our own ideas. This is often where we are not just challenged, but instead surprised. This is often where we are healed. Though it still absolutely knocks me down, it is in these places in Holy Scripture where we sometimes see how profoundly we are set free. Amen.